

# Psalms 74

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[ 0 : 00 ] Do you be seated and if you've got a Bible, turn to Psalm 74. Psalm 74. Some of you know C.S. Lewis wrote of Narnia famously, didn't he, that it was always winter but never Christmas.

! Have you heard that line? Always winter but never Christmas. A friend of mine wrote this week that one of the problems with the modern day church is it's always Christmas and never Advent. Always Christmas and never Advent.

And I think there's probably something to that. None of us like waiting. That's what Advent is about. I won't surprise anyone this morning by saying we hate waiting.

Whether it's waiting for the E1 at Eden Broadway. Waiting to pick up the kids at school. You know if the gates are open kind of just three or four minutes late, parents start to get touchy, don't they? Waiting for packages to come from Amazon. Waiting for the GP. Waiting for the GP. Waiting for the GP. We hate, don't we, being made to wait.

[ 1 : 06 ] I read an article about an airport in the States that had an incredible amount of complaints because of the baggage handling.

Particularly people were furious because they had to wait. So in an attempt to fix the problem they decided to employ twice as many baggage handlers, but the number of complaints didn't go down. It didn't go down that much because people thought they still had to wait too long at the baggage carousel. So what did they do?

The airport moved the baggage carousel to the far end of the airport. So people had quite a walk from when they got off their flight to the baggage carousel.

And guess what? By the time they got to the baggage carousel on that long walk, the bags were there. No more complaints.

[ 2 : 03 ] Problem solved. Apart from people starting to complain about the long walk to the baggage carousel. We hate waiting. And let me say to people that are in a culture like ours, that's an inbuilt challenge at Christmas, isn't it?

Because part of the reason that we celebrate Christmas, part of the reason that Christians have celebrated Christmas in the past is to teach us to wait.

To wait for it. We're reminded, as we understand the Christmas story, that that first Christmas required waiting. And those of us who live this side of that first Christmas, we're still waiting.

Our lives as Christians are characterized by waiting. We are waiting for the full expression of Christ's kingdom to come. We are waiting for the return of our King, the Lord Jesus Christ.

And so we too are waiting. And that's what I hope that we'll see as we walk through Psalm 74.

Because Psalm 74 is a picture of faithfully waiting.

[ 3 : 18 ] And how Christmas brought the end, in one sense of that waiting, and marked the beginning of another kind of waiting. And so come with me. What I want to do this morning is just slightly different.

I want us to walk through Psalm 74. And then I want to make two quick applications. So can you see, in the first few verses, he is waiting. In Psalm 74, verse 1.

It's on page, if you've got a church Bible, page 486. Asaph, he's the guy who wrote it. And he is waiting. Verse 1, he reflects on the destruction of Jerusalem.

That really sad moment in Israel's history where Jerusalem was attacked. And it is overrun by the Babylonians, the enemies of God's people. And the people of Israel, they are carried out into exile. And so we know the story of Daniel, don't we? Daniel in Babylon. We know all of which happened. That sad exile of God's people being carried off into Babylon, far from Israel.

[ 4 : 25 ] And that exile happened. They were kicked out of the land because of the failure of God's people. They didn't keep the covenant that God had made with him. They were not faithful to him.

They were an adulterous people. And so I want you to notice, the psalmist asked a kind of deep, heartfelt question in verse 1. He asks, doesn't he, Are you going to be mad for much longer, God? Are you going to be mad and angry for much longer, God? Oh God, why do you cast us off forever? Why does your anger smoke against the sheep of your pasture?

How long, God, is this going to last? How much longer will your judgment go on? And through the next few verses, can you see he recounts, doesn't he, the sadness and the horror of what happened when Israel lost the temple?

You can see it there in verse 3. He talks about it as these everlasting, perpetual ruins. These verses are filled with pathos.

[ 5 : 33 ] He remembers the times. He says, I remember the times your foes, they roared. They roared in the midst of your meeting place. In the place where we were to meet with you, God, these mindless men, they roared like beasts.

In verse 5, they went into the temple of God, and they acted like people hacking back the garden. They wielded axes to cut through thickets of trees.

They smashed the carved paneling with their axes and their hatchets. It's pretty graphic, isn't it? And this psalmist remembers the time when they entered the precious temple of God.

The place where God had promised to meet with his people. The place which was the symbol of God's presence with his people, with its beautiful carved wooden panels, as they're described in the book of Kings, and they cut them to pieces.

It's a really sad moment. He's bringing it back, and he's recalling it. And what is worse, he remembers the day when they set it on fire, verse 7.

[ 6 : 44 ] They set your sanctuary on fire. They profaned the dwelling place of your name, bringing it down to the ground. I want you to imagine us losing this building.

We arrive one Sunday, and it's gone up in smoke. Imagine people coming in here with ladders and axes, bringing the place down.

And they're setting it on fire, burning it. That would be tragic. We'd be gutted. We'd be really sad. But it would be nothing like what happened in the temple.

It would be nothing like what it meant to Israel to destroy the temple. Because when the temple was destroyed, it was the symbol of the nation. And so I want you to imagine the most important religious building you can think of.

Let's think about one of the great religious buildings in London. Let's think St. Paul's Cathedral. And let's merge that with a building of national significance, like the Houses of Parliament.

[ 7 : 53 ] And I want you to imagine both of them put together. That's the temple. And so imagine people coming into the Houses of Parliament, into the chamber, and into St. Paul's Cathedral, and cutting it to pieces, and then burning it to the ground.

Do you remember the outrage at the kind of Capitol Hill building in New York when that was stormed? Do you remember that? The incredible outrage that was felt.

They felt it was a desecrating of America, didn't they? And so imagine that. But it's much, much more than that.

It's the place where God dwelt. And they cut it to pieces, and they burned it to the ground. And the psalmist sees all of this, and in this beautiful, tragic reflection in Psalm 2074, he says, that was because we turned away from you, Lord, as your people.

And he cries to God, how much longer are you going to turn your head away from us? Look at verses 9 to 11. We do not see our signs.

[ 9 : 09 ] There's no longer any prophet. There's no one who speaks the word of God to us. And there's none among us who knows how long this is going to go on. How long, O God, is the foe to scoff?

How long is the enemy going to mock you? Is the enemy going to revile your name forever? Why do you hold back your hand, your right hand? Take it from the fold of your garments, and destroy them. That's a pretty bold thing to say, isn't it, in verse 11. Can you notice that? Look at the last line. The psalmist says, literally, God, how long are you going to have your hand in your pockets?

How long will you keep your hands in your pockets, Lord? Take them out of your pockets, God, and do something. For some of you, I don't know, that might come as a bit of a shock.

That the psalmist can speak to God like that. Why are you sitting on your hands, God? And maybe you think, well, Christians shouldn't speak like that. They should avoid such difficult questions of

God.

[10:19] But then, when you read the psalms, you find the psalms are full of people pouring out their hearts to God. saying to God, Lord, how long?

Why? Why? I don't know if you've seen the show, The Crown, we've watched it. Latter stuff isn't so great, but the early couple of series are great.

It's on Netflix. It's about Queen Elizabeth and the second. There's one episode, which I think is probably the best episode. It's the episode on the Abba Van disaster.

Some of you won't know about the Abba Van disaster. on the 21st of October, 1966, at 9.15 in the morning, in a mining village in South Wales, a slag heap of coal, tons and tons, hundreds, thousands of tons of coal, slid down the mountainside into a junior school.

116 children were killed and 28 adults. No one growing up in South Wales will ever forget that. The Queen was encouraged to visit by one of her advisors.

[11:30] Reportedly, according to the show, I doubt whether this happened, but she says, the Queen visits hospitals and not the scenes of accidents. And so Prince Philip is sent. Instead, and in the episode, it's incredibly moving, he walks with the survivors of the disaster to the gravesite where the children are buried.

And he returns to London, and the Queen asks him, how was it? And he responds with, extraordinary. The grief, the anger at the government, at the coal board, and at God too.

81 were buried today. The rage on all their faces, behind all their eyes, but they didn't smash things up. They didn't fight in the streets.

What did they do, asked the Queen? They sang. The whole community. It's the most astonishing thing I've ever heard.

In real life, the hymn that they sang was this, Jesus, lover of my soul, let me to thy bosom fly. While the nearer waters roll, while the tempest still is high, hide me, O my saviour, I'll hide, till the storm of life is past.

[12:55] I want to say to the person who's familiar with the Psalms, that is no surprise to us that they responded in that way. It's the way believers have always responded.

We see it right back in the book of Psalms. Believers have always sung. They've sung their grief and their anguish as they pour out their hearts to God.

And maybe you are here this morning, this Advent, and you are asking, why? Or you are asking, how much longer, God? And I want you to know that the Psalmist invites you here to ask your questions.

Because God is big enough to handle your questions and to answer your questions. And he invites you in his word to ask your questions. So ask him. Pour out your heart to him.

There's a beautiful moment, isn't there, in this Psalm where the Psalmist turns. And he moves from his anguished questioning to turning towards God.

[14:04] And it happens in verse 12. That he begins to remind himself of what is true about God. Can you see it in verse 12? Yet, yet, God my King is from of old working salvation in the midst of the earth.

And through the passage, he reminds himself again and again of what God has done. Of how it is that he is saved. And so let me say again to those of us who are going through dark times, here is a pattern that we can follow too.

Ask your questions of God. Yes, by all means. But like the Psalmist, remember who he is and what he's done. And turn to him. In verse 13 and 14, you get, things get a bit strange, don't they?

They are an unusual couple of verses. The Psalmist starts talking about monsters. You notice that? Verse 13, he talks about the sea monster.

And we saw last week in the book of Job on Sunday night, that's Leviathan. That's the language. These sea monsters. kind of crocodile creature, but more.

[15:23] The word is sometimes translated as dragon. And the Psalmist is saying here, Lord, I remember the time when you beat the dragon. Now remember what we saw earlier.

The enemies of God's people, can you see what they were described as in verse 4? They were roaring, weren't they?

The enemies of God's people have been described as beasts who went into the temple and roared. These verses, verse 13, I think they're talking about when God saved his people from Egypt.

And he brought them out of Egypt through the Red Sea. Look at verse 13. You divided the sea by your might. And you broke the head of the sea monsters on the waters.

God saved them by defeating the monster. God saved by defeating the enemy. And so the Psalmist remembers that time when God saved and he reminds himself of what it is that God has done.

[16:36] So from verses 15 to 17, you are powerful enough, God, to save because you are the one who makes streams flow. And you put the sun and the stars in their place.

And you are the one who set the boundaries for the seasons. And that is who you are, God. And as he remembers all of this, in this last stanza, he turns to God and he says, that is who you are, God. So please do something. Look at verse 18. Remember this, O Lord. Remember, O Lord, how the enemy scoffs and a foolish people reviles your name.

Do something, God. Do not deliver the soul of your dove to the wild beast. Do not forget the life of your poor forever. Have regard for the covenant for the dark places of the land are full of the habitations of violence.

Please act. And part of the reason that he wants God to act is for the sake of his people, Israel. He says, look at your church.

[17:41] Look at these afflicted people. The psalmist says, don't forget them, God. Don't forget these people. But there's another reason that he wants God to act. And that is that he's concerned with the honor of God's name.

He's desperate that God's honor would be maintained. And he says, God, you've got skin in the game here. You know that we are your people. They know that we are your people.

And look at how they mock you. So please, God, act. Those verses might seem a little bit distant to us because we don't in the main live in an honor and a shame culture.

But I do think in some ways this passage resonates in quite a big way because we get it. We get the pain of people mocking God. So I don't know whether you've noticed that when there's some tragedy like the tornado that's happened in Kentucky, when some tragedy takes place, that is on the media, politicians and people will say thoughts and prayers.

Have you noticed that? They will say thoughts and prayers. They'll put little emojis up on social media of hands together praying. And how is that responded to?

[19:01] That is responded to often, isn't it, with ridicule. There's a right ridicule of the insincerity of so many when they say thoughts and prayers. But within that ridicule is a ridicule of God.

And we feel it, don't we? When we hear people say, why pray? Your prayers are useless. What good do your prayers do for the people in Kentucky?

Why has God done this? And I think we get something of what the writer is saying. When he cries out in verse 22 and he says, rise up God, defend your cause.

Remember how fools mock you all the day long. Do not forget the clamor of your foes. the uproar of those who rise against you which goes up continually.

Rise up God. For your sake God, rise up and do something. And so here's the uncomfortable question. Here is Psalm 74 where the psalmist asks God to act.

[20:11] And the question is this, does this psalm ever get answered? Or is it a case of thoughts and prayers is it the emojis when nothing happens?

Well the truth is this psalm was answered and it was gloriously answered. But the psalmist had to wait. And the people of Israel had to wait for many, many, many years.

Actually, they have to wait until you get to the first few chapters of Luke's gospel. And that is actually where we see, don't we, the faithful waiting. those who would not let go of their trust in God. The God who finally brings salvation. And as we read through the first few chapters of Luke's gospel, we see people like Mary, Simeon, and Anna, and those who long for God's salvation to come and they finally get to see it.

But we saw a little bit in that faithful waiting in the song of Zechariah which we read. Because this is what Zechariah says in Luke chapter 1.

[21:19] He says, Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people. And he has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David.

As he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we should be saved from our enemies, and from the hand of all who hate us. To show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant.

Do you hear those words? They are dripping with the prayer of Psalm 74. They are Psalm 74 fulfilled. Zechariah finally got to see the salvation that God would bring for his people. We know a little bit of what that's like. A tiny, tiny little bit. You see it in sports teams. You see it in sports teams that have waited and waited and waited and waited and suddenly they achieve that long-awaited goal.

And the wait is over. They've got promotion into the Premier League or they've won the cup. And the wait was over and you see strangers hugging strangers. People going out into the streets.

[ 22 : 37 ] You see grown men crying because the wait was over. That's football. It doesn't matter. But imagine waiting hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of years for salvation to come and finally it dawns on that first Christmas.

And that's what we see in the first few chapters of Luke's Gospel where salvation finally comes. But as we come into this Christmas season let me give you two I think important lessons that we can take with us from Psalm 74.

The first is this. We're still waiting. We're still waiting. This is not as good as it gets.

There is something better that is coming. We are waiting. And like the Psalmist we are waiting for God to bring his salvation the final salvation that comes when Jesus returns.

And so if you find yourself longing for a better Christmas and if you think to yourself that Christmas is now aren't as good as they could be that is not wrong. Because we're looking for something better.

[ 23 : 53 ] And what I've just said is a really jarring note to our secular world. For if we are told aren't we that if you want to celebrate Christmas the way to celebrate Christmas is to be happy all the time.

that's the way to do it. It's a time for total happiness.

Relentless happiness. There's a website called WikiHow. Do you know it? And WikiHow it's great. It's a really good website. It tells you how to do things. So if you want to tile your bathroom it will tell you how to tile your bathroom.

And it gives you steps and it gives you illustrations on how to tile your bathroom. But there's a WikiHow page on how to get into the Christmas spirit with steps and illustrations.

Step one get into the mood by putting on some Christmas music. Step number two make Christmas biscuits. That will help you remember good times in the past.

[ 25 : 04 ] Step three try to be jolly. Laugh more. See the funny side of things. Be genuine in your mirth.

Okay I'll try and do that. I'll try and pull that off this afternoon. It's ridiculous. Christmas. I expect Christmas for many of you will not be easy.

Christmas is not always tinsel and sparkle sparkling shiny and happy is it? And part of what Christmas is meant to teach you and I is that we are waiting still waiting waiting for something better.

How tragic it would be if Christmas was fully fully satisfying. But it's not. And so children you know on Christmas night Christmas day evening let me tell you this alright you'll go to bed feeling a bit disappointed alright everybody does.

Christmas day Christmas day night you're happy you're glad but there's a little bit of disappointment. There's a bit of disappointment that you can't get up the following day and just do it all again. But that's right.

[ 26 : 27 ] And that disappointment on Christmas day is there to tell you you're waiting. You're waiting for something greater. You're waiting for the salvation that's promised when Jesus returns.

Here's the second thing Psalm 74 teaches us that it gives you something to help you in your weight because we get to remember the joy and hope that Israel finally had when their prayers were answered in that first Christmas.

And so we can rejoice. We can rejoice in the goodness of God's salvation that he came because he actually did come. The Psalmist cries out doesn't he will you ever take your hands out of your pockets God?

And God's response is yes more than that I'll come myself. And so we wait. We wait knowing what God has done in that first Christmas.

And we set our eyes faithfully and fully on the Lord Jesus Christ. And we wait for his coming again. Let's pray.